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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly reviews the impacts of assimilationist education for American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) and describes recent examples of successful AI/AN schools that incorporate students' native language and traditional culture into the curriculum. Beginning in the 1870s, federal policy emphasized assimilation as the goal of AI/AN education. Assimilationist policies had the effects of separating AI/AN students from their communities, weakening Native languages and cultures, driving students toward a marginalized identity, alienating students from schooling, and producing subtractive bilingualism. The past 3 decades have seen many efforts to restore and revitalize Native languages and cultures through the schools and to use Indigenous knowledge and language to meet both local and Western educational goals. Concurrently, the notion of appropriate academic knowledge has been reevaluated, and some teachers and elders have found ways to connect local practical and cultural knowledge to the school curriculum. Four exemplary AI/AN programs are described that involve community or tribally controlled schools, use Indigenous culture and language, and have resulted in a significant gain in academic achievement. These include Navajo programs in Arizona, a Native Hawaiian program in Honolulu, and an Inuit-controlled school using Inuktitut in Nunavik (northern Quebec). (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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ERIC Digest

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Jerry Lipka

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Schooling for Self-Determination: Research on the Effects of Including Native Language and Culture in the Schools

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ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
DIGEST

This Digest briefly reviews the educational effects of assimilationist schooling and later efforts to create schools supportive of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) self-determination. It then describes examples of tribal- or community-controlled programs that use students' Native language as the language of instruction and incorporate traditional culture into the curriculum. Any such review of the literature must begin with a reminder: Indigenous communities vary in their cultural, linguistic, and geographic circumstances as well as in their education goals. Therefore, it is not possible to prescribe specific programs across such a diverse array of situations.

Some Impacts of Assimilationist Schooling

Historically, federal education policy beginning in the 1870s and continuing for a century emphasized assimilation as the goal of AI/AN education. Lewis Meriam's 1928 report to the Secretary of Interior indicated that AI/AN schools were understaffed, had irrelevant curricula, and employed underqualified teachers. Many observers since that time have described effects of assimilationist policies, which separated AI/AN students from their communities and forced them to attend boarding schools, ultimately weakening AI/AN languages and cultures (recent accounts include Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lipka & Mohatt, 1998; Lomawaima, 1999; Skinner, 1999; and Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999). In fact, more than 40 books have been written to document the impacts of the Indian boarding school era.

The exclusion of AI/AN languages and cultures in Western schooling drove many AI/AN students toward a marginalized identity (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). In these cases the very act of learning required a student to deny his or her personal, cultural, and linguistic heritage (Garrett, 1996). Some students, faced with pressure to deny their heritage and embrace the values and goals of Western schooling, chose instead to resist. Ogbu's (1987) work across cultures reported resistance to schooling among AI/AN and other marginalized ethnic minorities, which in turn led to poor educational achievement and low graduation rates.

While the costs of assimilationist schooling were high, resulting in the weakening of Native cultures and languages, marginalizing Native identities, alienating students from the goals of schooling, and producing high rates of school leaving, the benefits to students who persisted were often low. Leaving local knowledge and language at the schoolhouse door was resulting in *subtractive bilingualism*; that is, many students were failing to attain academic competence in English while at the same time losing knowledge of their Indigenous languages and cultures (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997).

Finding a New Way—Schooling for Self-Determination

In the decades following World War II, AI/AN leaders fought for legislation to protect their rights to self-determination (Reyhner, 1989). With the successful passage of the *Indian Education Act of 1972* (P.L. 92-318 as amended) and the *Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act* of 1975 (P.L. 93-638), a new era began in Indian education. The past three decades have seen a variety of efforts to restore and revitalize Native languages and cultures through the schools (Demmert, 2001). Through such efforts, a growing number of Indigenous students have the opportunity to use Indigenous knowledge and language to meet *both* local *and* Western education goals (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999; Yazzie, 1999). This *both/and* paradigm (Lipka & McCarty, 1994) supports an educational approach that values both Native and Western knowledge, as illustrated in the following examples.

Academic and Everyday Knowledge

Concurrent with this movement to connect Native and Western culture has been a reevaluation of what is considered appropriate academic knowledge. In conducting research of tacit knowledge of children in rural Western Kenya, for example, Sternberg and colleagues (2001) concluded that the knowledge learned in everyday life may be distinct from that which leads to success in school. Similar research conducted in Alaska with Yup'ik Eskimo students (Grigorenko et al., 2001) found that rural Yup'ik students outperformed students from an Alaskan regional center on a test of practical knowledge. Yup'ik elders, researchers, and teachers have demonstrated how to connect practical and cultural knowledge to a school's math curriculum (Lipka, Wildfeuer, Wahlberg, George, & Ezran, 2001). For example, the elders used the everyday practice of building a fish rack, a rectangular structure used to dry salmon, and connected this to the mathematical topics of perimeter, area, and physical proofs (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998). The connection of local knowledge to schooling is not an easy process, however. The challenge is to adapt local culture and knowledge to Western schooling without trivializing and stereotyping.

Exemplary Programs

Today, many AI/AN communities are employing a both/and approach in their school systems. The sample of programs described below have met at least two of three criteria derived from research syntheses by Deyhle & Swisher (1997), Swisher & Tippeconnic (1999), and Yazzie (1999): (1) the program must involve community/tribally controlled schools, (2) the program must use the Indigenous culture and language, (3) academic achievement must show a significant and measurable gain.

Rock Point, Arizona. Schools in Rock Point teach all classes in the local language—Navajo. Deyhle and Swisher (1997) report on ethnographic research conducted by McLaughlin:

> School administrators, teachers, and community members designed K-12 instruction in Navajo to reinforce the cultural and linguistic resources of the students who, at that point, had the lowest test scores in the Navajo Nation. . . . These Navajo students now consistently score higher than other comparable reservation children on tests of reading, language, and math in English. (p. 171)

Holm and Holm (1995), also studying Rock Point Community School, report "students have considerably more confidence and pride [than comparable students at nearby schools]" (pp. 147-148).

Fort Defiance, Arizona. Schools in Fort Defiance also offer the option of being taught with Navajo as the language of instruction. Before the program was instituted,

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only one tenth of Navajo five-year-olds were competent in Navajo; additionally, many monolingual English students were not academically competent in English. After the school established a voluntary Navajo Immersion (NI) program, "NI students did considerably better on tests of Navajo language ability [than those in the English-only program]" (Holm & Holm, 1995, p. 150). Meanwhile, NI students tested as well in English proficiency as the English-only students, while the majority of the fourth-grade English-only students tested lower in Navajo than they had in kindergarten. In sum, the Navajo immersion students were gaining control of their own language at no loss to their knowledge of English while the English-only students were barely maintaining competence in English with great loss to their Native tongue. Further, the NI students greatly outscored the English-only students in math.

Honolulu, Hawaii. Brenner (1998) reports on an experimentally designed study based in Hawaii, the Kamehameha Early Education Project. Using ethnographic methodology, she and other educators studied how Native Hawaiian children developed mathematical knowledge in everyday life (e.g., shopping and interacting with their families), then used this information as a foundation for an experimental math curriculum. Brenner also supported the use of pidgin in the classroom. Brenner found that "the children in the experimental class scored much higher on the standardized math test. The control class averaged at the 54th percentile, while the experimental class averaged at the 82nd percentile" (p. 233). Brenner's research design was able to isolate the change in instructional strategy as the variable most strongly associated with the increased scores.

Nunavik (Northern Quebec), Canada. Some results of a long-term research and development project of the Kativik School Board, an Inuit-controlled school district in the Canadian Arctic, found that Inuit students involved in an Inuktitut language program did better on tests of Inuktitut than those enrolled in the English classes or French classes (Wright, Taylor, Ruggeiro, MacArthur, & Elijassiapik, 1996). They also showed steady improvement in English. While students in all three language programs tested at the same level for conversational Inuktitut, the students in the Inuktitut program did considerably better than the others on the more difficult academic language proficiency tests.

> What this indicates is that Inuit children in the Inuktitut program are developing a level of language skill that will allow them to use the Inuktitut language to solve complex mental problems. . . . [Further,] Inuit children in all three programs began kindergarten with positive self-esteem (most children see themselves as smart, nice, happy, etc.). . . . However, . . . students in the Inuktitut program showed an increase in self-esteem. (pp. 12, 15)

The research efforts of the Kativik School Board show how long-term systematic research can help locally controlled schools make decisions and develop programs that result in positive, community-defined student outcomes.

Looking Ahead

The last few decades have shown a steady increase in the number of efforts by tribal- or community-controlled schools to use their language and culture as an integral part of the fabric of schooling. These efforts need to be systematically studied. As Tippeconnic stressed, "research must not only determine how well students are doing academically but also explore how Native languages, cultures, and ways of knowing influence the teaching-learning process in local and tribally controlled educational settings" (1999, pp. 46-47). And as Yazzie explained, "We can assume there is a direct relationship among culture, curriculum, and learning in American Indian schooling experience. But to what degree? We do not know" (1999, p. 97).

At this juncture, evidence exists to support pursuing the inclusion of Native language and culture in educational programs serving AI/AN students as a strategy for improving academic and other educational outcomes. However, much more needs to be known. Further, research must be context specific, taking into consideration the circumstances of the local community and—as illustrated in the Kativik School Board example—it must focus on the education goals set by particular AI/AN communities.

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